Frank Swinnerton's Delightful "Shops and Houses"

By HARRY ESTY DOUNCE.

THIS account of Mr. Frank Swinnerton's *Shops and Houses* will embody no vision anent Mr. Swinnerton's earlier work, the ripening of his method and such like. With shame and regret your reporter confesses that although there are four earlier Swinnertons, and one at least is fairly celebrated, the new one is the only one he has read. Before turning its tenth page, however, he was joyfully determined to get all the others as soon as might be and never to miss a Swinnerton again.

For by the time the author's quiet certainty of his material, his resources and himself had made that pleasantest of first impressions whereunder you trust your author not to tell you more than he knows and not to undertake more than he can manage. And it was seeming as if this particular author knew and could manage virtually anything.

Bores are forever advising new writers to prepare by Seeing Life—as if it could be done deliberately, like seeing the Aquarium. In common with every other fictional expositor of human character worth notice, Mr. Swimmerton evidently was seeing life at 3 and not only seeing it, but seeing into it. Indications are not wanting that he is judiciously read in what Bernard Shaw might style the human-natural historians. But his data of natural history are his own; he got them at first hand and by virtue of a most penetrating insight. No amount of mere assimilation of other men's ideas could ever have prepared him, for instance, to write the remarkable interplay between young Louis Vechantor and the younger Daunton boy, where the latter confides in the former his love affair vs. apron strings predicament, and Mr. and Mrs. Vechantor's son, secretly in a like position more or less, brightens and expands as he urges Mrs. Daunton's son to cut free.

Shops and Houses is a victorious hybrid, meaning that without loss of power and grip it goes half its length as one kind of thing and there becomes another kind, radically different. It begins as a cool and clever exploration, non-sympathetic but by no means clinical, of the inside of a suburb of London, an old, ingrown village—for the right American counterpart of the special parochialism of which we should probably look among the suburbs of Boston. This village Mr. Swinnerton demonstrates for you from the Vechantors—the Magnificent Vechantors, Mr. Tarkington, who will like the book, might call them—through the Church of England minister and the news and scandalmongers and the designing mammas with their impalpable joint domination, down to the green grocer and the servants.

With a simple stroke that opens no end of attractive possibilities he turns the grocer out of business to make place for a second household of Vechantors, relatives of a long lost low caste branch, who by pure chance and to the mutual dismay of the two families, open shop in Beckwith. The Magnificent Vechantors have a son at whom all local caps are set. The grocer Vechantors have a daughter. The son, Louis, his senstive individualism restive as he supposes under the bondage of Beckwith's codified prudery and snobbery and under the designs of the enterprising sisters Hughes, but actually—this unobtrusive suggestion is very fine—under the home subservience that galls him, goes out of his way to be decent to his grocer cousins. The girl cousin resents it as patronage, but her resentment, itself only snobbery, is readily allayed.

So far, splendid. What a priceless situation! At just this point, however, comes the aforementioned change of the book. With all his knowledge and skill Mr. Swinnerton must, in a way, be young. He falls head over heels in love with the girl, shifts interest to her from the carefully developed character of Louis and throws his situation out the window. Henceforth *Shops and Houses* is to rely for the reader's approval on the principle that all the world loves a lover's idealization of his beloved. Dorothy, the girl, has become such an idealization—albeit the one Mr. Swinnerton sets forth is hers of Louis. Her emotions cease to convince you as being the genuine article studied from nature. They impress you as being the emotions with which the imagination of a nice, shy young man in love with her would fondly endow her as directed upon himself. And Mr. Swinnerton is that nice young man.

Such a cataclysm ought to smash up any novel; therefore let me hastily affirm that it does not and that its failure to do so and the success of the remaining chapters in carrying the reader on with enthusiasm unabated are an astonishing proof of Mr. Swinnerton's native power. For he is a good lover, as potent therein as he was fascinating in analysis. He does no sentimental counterfeiting and if he chooses to throw away all his intriguing preparations and fling himself at Dorothy's feet, he is able to compel you to do likewise. It plays ducks and drakes a dozen times with the probabilities—but do not expect to stop reading and file objections! The day after finishing *Shops and Houses* you are likely to chuckle at every one concerned, yourself included. You are equally likely to wait with impatience for the author's next.

So long as she remains a real girl the worst point to be made against Dorothy, and one which places her well below Veronica Hughes, although the latter is a deliberate study of a certain disagreeable constitution, is the fact that Dorothy has too many advantages. It is all right for the grocer's daughter to triumph over Veronica and score off Beckwith in general, but this grocer's daughter's victory is too cheap. She could hardly miss it. Not only is she the strongest and finest of the young women and the ablest; she is also the most cultivated—might be an Ambassador's daughter. How she came by her cultivation is perfectly accounted for. But why not have left her without it? Then there *would* have been some fun in her position, as Louis's honest heart's desire among the caste-blinded snobs and the frustrational prudes of Beckwith—that is, there would, if Mr. Swinnerton had kept his head and made the most of his original idea.

The Hughes girls merit almost unmeasured praise. The eldest of them, Adela, is of the kind of a woman whose adolescence was early and eager and whose virgin maturity is hysterical and pseudo-sanctified. She is near the Beckwith dead line of hopeless old maidenhood and she is feebly competing with the savage Veronica for Louis. The episode in which she wrecks her pathetic chance by flaring out at him over a most delicate discussion of "a certain class" of plays, which he defends, and then flying to her room to cry, is novel so far as your reporter's reading goes. It could not be better imagined from observation or better managed.

As for Veronica, it may be that Mr. Swinnerton is a trifle overinclined to attribute her Veronicism to Beckwith, the truth being that she was born with it and would have been the same in London or Paris. But that is a rather metaphysical and captious issue to raise. However, she is accounted for, the whole of Veronica is down in black and white and is superb—a cruel-passional, predatory young primitive, who can't use her lures on the man she wants without scoffing and bickering at him, can't outjockey poor Adela in his presence without repeatedly betraying viciousness, and finally must simply explode her whole game by berating Louis in the matter of Dorothy without the least ground or any claim upon him, and then later break down into slander and open fury at the girl to whom her own behavior has done a great deal to consign him.

SHOPS AND HOUSES. By Frank Swinnerton. George H. Doran Company. $1.50.

"Steep Trails"

By GEORGE GORDON.

MR. JOHN BURROUGHS once urged Mr. Hamlin Garland to undertake the Life of John Muir. At the time it was impossible; and now . . .

John Muir wrote with difficulty, grunting and groaning in the travail of labor. His notes scrawled in the open, upon some elbow of rock overlooking the Yosemite, beside some desert pool, collected with the years and in age lay thick around him like leaves about some autumn oak; yet he dreaded and everlastingly procrastinated in the work of revision. When forced to write he tore the meat of thought from out the carcass of past experience with a desperation that, seemingly of utter need, was born of the impatience of one who, used to trying his strength before the blizzard, is set against his will to the performance of some ridiculously clerkly task.

And yet John Muir wrote most wonderfully well. Not loudly, as was the habit with Col. Roosevelt when he told of the West, but clearly as one whose authority needs no emphasis; not fluently as a lecturer addressing the ignorant, but with a gentle charm that bore in every sentence the impress of the man—a man who had looked with open eyes upon the miracles of God; not minutely, numbering the days and hours spent in communion with nature, but carefully, as one who fears through inadvertence to bear false witness against a friend.

For it was as a friend that he spoke of every living thing upon the mountains—the huge trees of California, the snow flowers, the prospectors, trappers, Indians, the mountain sheep, the mountain lions. It was as a friend that he encountered life upon the *Steep Trails* that wind about Mount Shasta, that skirt the shores of Puget Sound, that fare through the forests of Nevada along the rivers of Oregon, to halt above the Grand Cañon of the Colorado.

But perhaps the most valuable contribution is his vivid testimony concerning the work of God. He neither scoffed, nor, when he heard the voice that breathed o'er Eden whispering along the grass, was he afraid with any amazement. He walked humbly, straightly, before God. To travel with him is to come upon a world that everywhere, untouched by time, unhindered by man, displays the clay fresh from creation's hand. He recognized the Creator in the strength and beauty of nature, in trailing vine, in rushing torrent, in furrowed valley. And his heart was glad. For him, as for King David, the hills stood up and clapped, the fields rejoiced to praise the Lord.

STEEP TRAILS. By John Muir. Houghton Mifflin Company. $3.

"The Untamed"

READING *The Untamed* means getting to know Whistling Dan Barry, who had a yellowish glare and a peculiar soft whistle that resembled the sound made by the wind playfully blowing the leaves of trees. His companions were Satin, the wild horse of the range, and Black Bart, a wolf-dog who protected and revered his master. *The Untamed*, it will be seen, is a character study; not only of a man, but of a horse and dog as well.

The Untamed is a Western story with some distinction about it. Whistling Dan's love affairs and his somewhat primitive and wild habits are told about with skill. Dan's fights are many, and on his part clean; he was quick on the draw and had an unusual instinct of danger.

Dan had been brought up as a peaceful citizen of the West, taught not to harm any one and to avoid quarrelling. But he came in contact with an outlaw named Jim Silent. There was a fight, and when blood, his own blood, trickling down his forehead, thick, red and salty, had wetted his lips, then Dan knew he must "get" Jim Silent. You can bet he did. There is a love story, sure.

THE UNTAMED. By Max Brand. G. P. Putnam's Sons. $1.50.

"A Little Gray Home in France"

HELEN DAVENPORT GIBBONS has not been outside of France since the declaration of war. She has during these years devoted herself to relief work of various kinds, organizing among other things "Sauvons les Bebes," which provided layettes for nearly 5,000 new bor Parisians. In *A Little Gray Home in France* she has endeavored to put the American doughboy on paper, to tell what he thinks of France, what he thinks of the war and most of all, it would seem, what he thinks of Helen Davenport Gibbons, her Little Gray Home and her four children.

There is no doubt that the soldiers with whom Mrs. Gibbons has come in contact have been treated with most generous hospitality and consideration (we have her own word for it), and it may be that what she has to say will touch other hearts more nearly than it has ours. We have striven in vain to put down the feeling that this record of her merciful work might have been made more gracefully by other hands than her own. One thing is remarkable for its absence. There is no record of a single soldier's having uttered the immortal words "Oh, Boy!" Otherwise the doughboy's conversation is normal.

A LITTLE GRAY HOME IN FRANCE. By Helen Davenport Gibbons. The Century Company. $1.50.

Not only WHO but HOW?

The MYSTERY of the 13th FLOOR

By LEE THAYER

A double twisted mystery story, set in New York City, with a fascinating love theme that is really a part of the story. The problem is, not only who killed Lawyer Stone as he sat in his office within a few feet of clerks and stenographers, but how could he have been killed at all under the circumstances. The mystery challenges the most ingenious and resourceful reader to solve in advance of the conclusion.

3rd Edition

"A capital story."—*Philadelphia Ledger*
"One of the best mystery novels of the year."
—*Boston Record*
"It thrills and thrills again."—*Philadelphia Press*
"Unusually ingenious in plot, and unusually mystifying."
—*Pittsburgh Chronicle-Telegraph*

Price $1.50. Buy it today.
And send a copy to somebody.

At all bookstores
Published by THE CENTURY CO. 353 Fourth Avenue New York City